

# EXPOSURE TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AMONG POOR CHILDREN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS OR RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY



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Over the past several decades, the public health crisis of intimate partner violence (IPV) has received increased attention. Victims of intimate partner violence report various patterns of abuse at the hands of their partners including, though not limited to, physical and sexual assault. Between 2001 and 2005, 38% of intimate partner violence in the United States was experienced by mothers with children under the age of twelve.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is estimated that over three million children are at risk of exposure to intimate partner violence each year, with such risk greatest for children under the age of six.<sup>2</sup> Witnessing this violence adversely shapes a child's social-emotional development, with evidence of increased externalizing and internalizing behavior problems compared to those who do not witness family violence. In addition, children who are exposed to intimate partner violence are less likely to succeed in school than children who are not exposed.

Research suggests that stressful life events, such as intimate partner violence, and structural factors, including poverty and residential instability, greatly increase a family's risk for homelessness. Although intimate partner violence affects families across all socio-economic groups, living in poverty greatly increases the risk. Moreover, there is a bi-directional relationship between intimate partner violence and poverty: poverty can decrease one's resources, both economic and social, that are likely to increase the probability of escaping the abuse. On the other hand, the violence itself can decrease the likelihood of the victim being lifted out of poverty. Not only does living in poverty place families at greater risk for homelessness and residential instability, the co-occurrence of these factors increases the likelihood of experiencing intimate partner violence.

One of the most important goals for families experiencing intimate partner violence is safety, so as the abuse escalates, many mothers and children make the difficult decision to leave their homes. Impoverished families escaping abuse, however, frequently have limited choices with regard to housing; these options include short-term solutions such as doubling-up with family or friends or entering the shelter system. Studies estimate that half of all homeless mothers experience intimate

partner violence and over one-quarter of women in shelter cite domestic violence as the cause of their homelessness.<sup>3</sup> Young children in these families not only witness the abuse of their mothers but also experience instability, by being displaced from their homes, schools, and, possibly, their fathers. Additionally, these children are at an increased risk of having been abused themselves.

Once families are forced to make the decision to leave their homes because of intimate partner violence, they leave behind not only their belongings and familiar surroundings, but also their social support networks. Mothers who are victims of intimate partner violence and live in shelter are prone to greater social isolation than is found among low-income, housed victims, and this isolation can lead to increased fear and distrust of others. Compounded with the stresses of living in shelter, such as a lack of privacy, this isolation can impact the relationship between a mother and her young child. Children in these situations may experience increased parent-child conflict and display aggressive behavior toward their peers. At adulthood, females who witnessed intimate partner violence during childhood are more likely to experience abuse by intimate partners, while males are more likely to abuse their partners when compared to children from non-violent households.

Using longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample of families, this research brief contributes to the field by analyzing how a family's experiences with homelessness, poverty, and residential instability over the first five years of a child's life are associated with incidences of intimate partner violence, specifically physical and sexual abuse against mothers by the child's father. In addition, children's exposure to such abuse by the time they are five years old is investigated.

## Data

This brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being (FFCW) Study, a nationally representative sample of 4,898 children born in 20 large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000.<sup>4</sup> The FFCW Study oversampled births to unmarried parents, accounting for a large number of low-income families from diverse backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Mothers (and some fathers) were

## EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY INCREASES YOUNG CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO A PHYSICAL FIGHT BETWEEN THEIR PARENTS BY 75%

interviewed shortly after the child's birth, usually in the hospital, and again when their children were one, three, and five years old. A nine-year follow-up was fielded between 2007 and 2009, with an expected release sometime in 2010/2011. Core interviews with mothers, conducted via telephone, included questions regarding household demographic characteristics, housing status, household income, intimate partner relationships, and children's exposure to violence between parents. Sample weights were used in the analysis to ensure that the descriptive statistics were representative of the population.<sup>6</sup>

In this brief, five-year-old children were classified into three mutually exclusive groups based on their household's average annual income from birth to age five, as well as their family's housing history. First, only the housing histories of children who were in poverty were examined. Poverty status was determined by calculating the average poverty level for a child over his or her entire life (from birth to age five), and children whose lifetime level on average was below 100% of the poverty line were classified as being poor. In 2005, the approximate year the children were five years old, the federal poverty line for a family of four was \$19,806 (two adults and two children under age 18); therefore, families earning less than this amount, or below 100% of the poverty line, would be considered poor.<sup>7</sup>

The first group, "ever homeless," included children whose mothers reported living in a shelter or in a place not intended for housing at any time during the first five years of her child's life ( $n=198$ ). The remaining poor children, who had not experienced homelessness, were classified by their experiences with residential instability, namely the number of times they moved from birth to age five. Research documents the adverse effects of multiple moves (three or more) on child developmental outcomes. Therefore, the second group, "residentially unstable," included children whose families moved three or more times from birth to age five ( $n=468$ ). The third and final group, "residentially stable," included children in families who moved less than three times from birth to age five ( $n=1,046$ ). While children in these three groups shared the experience of growing up in poverty, the main factor differentiating the ever homeless children from the residentially unstable and residentially stable children was their experience with a severe housing crisis. Additionally, children in poor households that change residences frequently can be considered most "at risk" for homelessness, as the combination of chronic poverty and other factors that force a family to move multiple times can also force a household into homelessness.<sup>8</sup>

To measure intimate partner violence, mothers were asked at each wave of data collection if the children's fathers had abused the mothers physically or sexually during the last month of the relationship. Experiences of physical abuse against mothers

when children were ages one and three included the mother being slapped, kicked, hit with an object, or hit with a fist by their children's fathers. At age five, physical abuse included all acts described in years one and three, as well as the mother being pushed, grabbed, shoved, or having an object thrown at her. Sexual abuse was defined as whether or not the child's father forced the mother to have unwanted sex or perform sexual acts when the child was age one, three, and five.<sup>9</sup> Children's exposure to intimate partner violence was measured only at age five, whereby mothers reported whether their children had witnessed a physical fight between the parents or whether their children's fathers had seriously hurt their mothers at any time during the previous two years.<sup>10</sup> Further differentiation between children's exposure to either a physical fight between the parents or to their mothers being seriously hurt by their fathers was not available in the FFCW study.

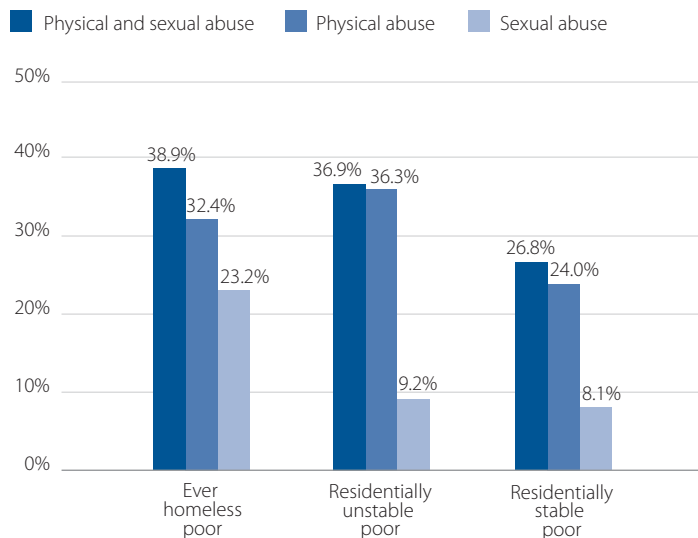
### Demographics

Overall, mothers in the three groups were predominately non-white, in their late twenties, and had two children. Ever homeless poor families reported greater utilization of financial assistance programs, such as receipt of cash welfare (TANF), and mothers were less likely to be in a relationship with their children's fathers. Compared to the other families, residentially unstable poor mothers were less likely to receive rental subsidies or to have completed high school. Residentially stable poor families moved considerably fewer times, the mothers were more likely to be married to their children's fathers when children were age five, and more likely to be Hispanic than poor families who experienced homelessness or were residentially unstable.

**Figure 1**

PERCENT OF MOTHERS EXPERIENCING PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE DURING CHILDREN'S FIRST FIVE YEARS

(by housing and poverty status)



### Mothers' Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

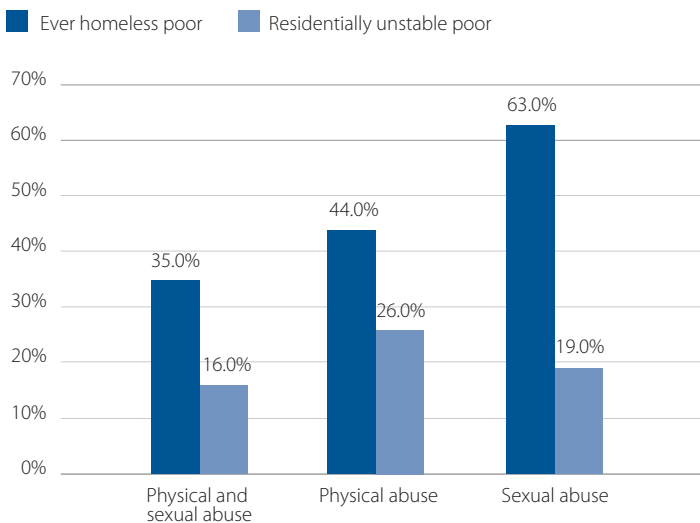
By the time their children were five years old, ever homeless and residentially unstable poor mothers reported higher rates of intimate partner violence than their residentially stable poor cohorts (see Figure 1). Over one-third (38.9%) of ever homeless poor and residentially unstable poor (36.9%) mothers reported both physical and sexual abuse, compared to 26.8% of residentially stable poor mothers. The most prevalent form of relationship violence, physical abuse, was suffered most frequently by residentially unstable poor mothers, at 36.3%, while 32.4% of ever homeless poor and 24.0% of residentially stable poor mothers reported this type of abuse. Almost one-quarter (23.2%) of ever homeless poor mothers were sexually abused by their children's fathers, compared to 9.2% and 8.1% of residentially unstable and residentially stable poor mothers, respectively.

Furthermore, after controlling for demographic characteristics, experiencing homelessness, poverty, and residential instability greatly increased the likelihood of mothers experiencing intimate partner violence, in comparison to residentially stable poor mothers.<sup>11</sup> In particular, living in poverty and experiencing homelessness at any time during the first five years of a child's life increased a mother's probability of being abused by 35.0% for both types of abuse, 44.0% for physical abuse, and 63.0% for sexual abuse. Comparatively, living in poverty and moving three or more times also increased the chances of intimate partner violence, though to a lesser degree: 16.0% for both physical and sexual abuse, 26.0% for physical abuse, and 19.0% for sexual abuse (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

PERCENT INCREASE IN THE PROBABILITY OF MOTHERS EXPERIENCING ABUSE

(by housing and poverty status)



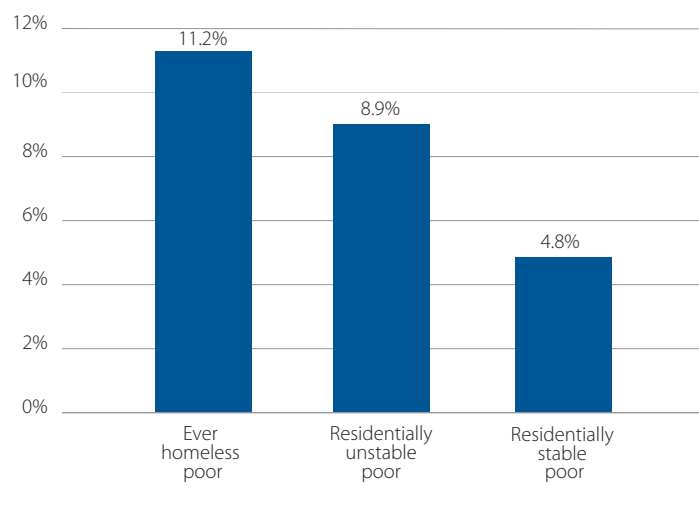
### Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence

As seen in Figure 3, ever homeless poor children (11.2%) were slightly more likely to have ever witnessed a physical fight between their parents than residentially unstable poor (8.9%) or residentially stable poor (4.8%) children at age five. Residentially unstable poor children (4.8%) were more likely to witness their mothers being seriously hurt by their fathers, compared to 2.7% of residentially stable poor and 0.6% of ever homeless poor children (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3**

PERCENT OF CHILDREN EVER EXPOSED TO A PHYSICAL FIGHT BETWEEN THEIR MOTHERS AND THEIR FATHERS AT AGE FIVE

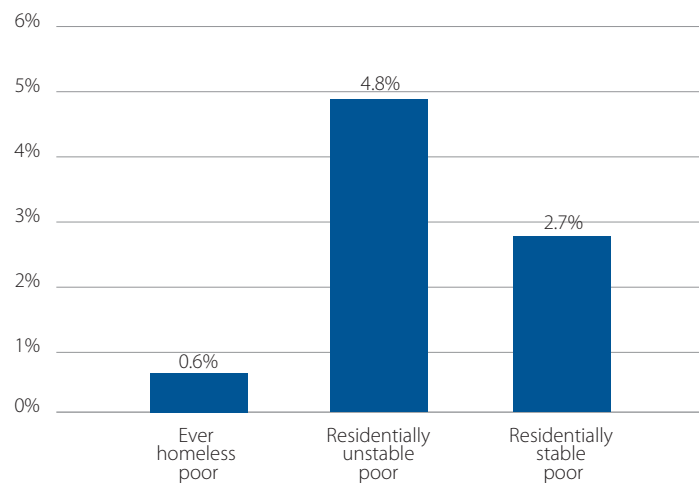
(by housing and poverty status)



**Figure 4**

PERCENT OF CHILDREN EVER EXPOSED TO MOTHERS BEING SERIOUSLY HURT BY THEIR FATHERS AT AGE FIVE

(by housing and poverty status)



In addition, experiencing homelessness, poverty, and residential instability greatly increased the likelihood of children's exposure to intimate partner violence at age five in comparison to residentially stable poor children.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, experiencing homelessness at any time during the first five years of a poor child's life increased children's exposure to a physical fight between their mothers and fathers by 75.0%, while moving three or more times increased the chance of exposure by 66.0%.

## Conclusion

As this brief demonstrates, experiences with homelessness, poverty, residential instability, and intimate partner violence are largely intertwined. The findings from this study offer further support for this association, and indicate that intimate partners victimize a greater percentage of poor mothers who experience either homelessness or residential instability during the first five years of their children's lives than residentially stable poor mothers. Similarly, ever homeless and residentially unstable poor children have higher rates of exposure to a physical fight between parents than residentially stable poor children at age five. Residentially unstable and stable poor children, however, are more likely to witness their mothers being seriously hurt by their fathers than are ever homeless poor children.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, these findings lend further credence to the similarities between families experiencing homelessness and residential instability, and point to long-term, negative economic and social consequences for mothers and their children.

The cumulative effects of these early experiences on children's well-being is well documented in the literature, with impacts seen across various developmental domains, such as social-emotional functioning, relationships with parents and peers, and academic achievement. For mothers, these events are shown to affect parenting behaviors and well-being, thus potentially compromising the quality of interactions with their children. Moreover, the concomitant nature of these experiences for many families is yet another barrier to financial independence and stability, which are necessary and important goals for families to achieve in order to break the cycle of poverty and violence. Further examination into the relationship among intimate partner violence, homelessness, poverty, and residential instability can contribute to a better understanding of the complex needs of mothers and children suffering from intimate partner violence and exposure, as well as identify where to directly target prevention efforts and services.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Shannon Catalano, "Intimate Partner Violence in the United States," U.S. Department of Justice, 2007, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/ipvus.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Joy D. Osofsky, "Children Who Witness Domestic Violence: The Invisible Victims," *Social Policy Report* IX (1995): 1–20.
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Conference of Mayors, *Hunger and Homelessness Survey: A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: A 25-City Survey*, December 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a joint effort by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Center for Health and Wellbeing, the Columbia Population Research Center, and the National Center for Children and Families at Columbia University. For more information, visit: <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was supported by Grant Number R01HD36916 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD). The contents of this paper are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of NICHD.
- <sup>5</sup> Nancy E. Reichman, Julien O. Teitler, Irwin Garfinkel, and Sara S. McLanahan, "Fragile Families: Sample and Design," *Children and Youth Services Review* 23 (2001): 303–326.
- <sup>6</sup> Sample weights at wave five were used to obtain unbiased statistical estimates. The FFCW sample was selected using a complex sample design, where the sample members were not selected independently and were not selected with equal probabilities. All of the weights adjust for the sample design (probability of selection), non-response at baseline, and attrition based on observed characteristics over the waves. For more information on sample selection and research design, see Nancy E. Reichman, Julien O. Teitler, Irwin Garfinkel, and Sara S. McLanahan, "Fragile Families: Sample and Design," *Children and Youth Services Review* 23 (2001): 303–326.
- <sup>7</sup> Federal poverty thresholds vary by family size and composition, and by calendar year. For example, in 2005 a family comprised of: (1) a woman under 65 years old and a child under 18 years old was in poverty if the household income was less than \$13,461, or (2) a woman under 65 years old and two children under 18 were in poverty if the household income was less than \$15,735. For more information on the poverty threshold tables, see "Poverty Thresholds by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 years," U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld.html>
- <sup>8</sup> The prevalence of homelessness and housing instability in the FFCW Survey has been analyzed in a previous report from the Institute for Children and Poverty, "Examination of Residential Instability and Homelessness among Young Children," Fall 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> For the purpose of this study, instances of physical and sexual abuse reported by mothers at any or all of the three time points are counted only once.
- <sup>10</sup> Although mothers were asked to report their own experiences of intimate partner violence when their children were ages one, three, and five, children's exposure to intimate partner violence was only assessed at age five.
- <sup>11</sup> Binary logistic regressions were conducted to examine which characteristics predicted whether or not mothers would experience intimate partner violence by their children's fathers from birth to age five. The models controlled for: (1) child's sex; (2) mother's race/ethnicity; (3) mother's education; (4) received rental subsidy; (5) mother's relationship with the child's father; (6) poverty and experienced homelessness; and (7) poverty and residential instability. Marginal effects were calculated in order to determine the changes in predicted probabilities for intimate partner violence by experiencing homelessness, poverty, or residential instability. The reference category for these analyses was residentially stable poor.
- <sup>12</sup> Binary logistic regressions were conducted to examine which characteristics predicted whether or not children would be exposed to intimate partner violence against their mothers by their fathers by age five. The model controlled for: (1) child's sex; (2) mother's race/ethnicity; (3) mother's education; (4) received rental subsidy; (5)



mother's relationship with the child's father; (6) poverty and experienced homelessness; and (7) poverty and residential instability. Marginal effects were calculated in order to determine the changes in predicted probabilities for children's exposure to intimate partner violence by experiencing homelessness, poverty, and residential instability. These effects are reported only for a child's exposure to a physical fight between parents by age five; the number of children exposed to mothers being seriously hurt by the children's fathers by age five was too small to conduct this analysis. The reference category for these analyses was residentially stable poor.

<sup>13</sup> The limitations associated with this study are: (1) the study's design does not lend itself to establishing temporal or causal relationships between mothers experiencing IPV or children's exposure with homelessness, poverty, or residential instability; (2) all outcomes were assessed via maternal report, including children's exposure; therefore, results should be interpreted with caution for these reports might have been biased by maternal characteristics or social desirability; and (3) the age of the children precluded FFCW from obtaining children's own reports of exposure to IPV.

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